

PERSONAL NARRATIVES

OF EVENTS IN THE

WAR OF THE REBELLION,

BEING PAPERS READ BEFORE THE

RHODE ISLAND SOLDIERS AND SAILORS

HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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THE LAST TOUR OF DUTY

AT THE

SIEGE OF CHARLESTON.

BY

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THE LAST TOUR OF DUTY
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[Read before the Society, April 13, 1881.]

THE seventeenth of February, 1865, will always be remembered by those of the army and navy who, for so long, had been engaged in the siege and blockade of Charleston and its harbor. All had been accomplished by the army that seemed possible, and we had been waiting and watching for the navy to "go in," with much impatience.

It always seemed to us in the batteries that this could be successfully done; that a monitor or two might be lost, but it was preferable to lose them in action rather than to have them sunk by gales and

torpedoes while at anchor outside, events which had already happened.

We had sufficient reason for this conclusion, as we had on several occasions seen the monitors in close action, and knew how well they could stand the severe pounding they had been subjected to. It is not for me to make any criticisms, however, my only purpose being to give a simple story of our experience at the front on this occasion, describing somewhat minutely the details, positions and incidents relative thereto.

On the morning of the day mentioned, my turn came to go to the battery, having for a long time previous been alternating with Lieutenant J. E. Burroughs in this duty, each serving twenty-four hours at the front and the succeeding twenty-four hours in camp, which was located two or three miles down the island, our company being divided into reliefs, making for them an average of about one day at the battery and two days in camp, excepting special occasions, when we had extra firing for some reason.

Our duty was in Fort Putnam, located on the ex-

treme end of Morris Island, called Cummings Point, and the same iron battery, afterwards named Gregg, of which we read so much at the time of the first bombardment of Fort Sumter, in 1861, though we failed to recognize any resemblance between it and the cuts published in the pictorial papers of that time. We were constantly reminded of the fact that this work was built for the purpose of firing on the fort, by evidences of the great strength and careful construction of the original work, the bomb-proof and magazine being covered with huge timbers and a layer of railroad iron.

As we approach the northern part of the island we first come to Fort Strong, formerly called Fort Wagner, and the scene of one of the most severe actions of the war. This is a most complete fortification, of immense strength, a heavy battery, and extends entirely across the island, which is narrow at this point. The work is garrisoned by a company of our regiment, permanently, and is a very convenient and hospitable resting-place for us on our way further up the island, as well as for the many visitors constantly coming to view the situation.

Our duty, however, is half a mile beyond, so we pass Fort Strong by the sea-front, then, leaving the beach, turn through the sand-hills, by the large stockade, in which are confined a large number of confederate officers, guarded by the Fifty-fifth Massachusetts regiment (colored), and soon come to our mortar-batteries, just beyond which we pass Fort Chatfield, and are at the front.

Before entering Fort Putnam we must pass over a space of about four hundred yards, which is entirely unprotected from the batteries of the rebels on Sullivan's Island and the sharpshooters in Fort Sumter, who, stationed on its parapet, constantly annoy us, and for a long time it has been almost impossible to get across this space without drawing their fire and hearing the zip of a rifle-ball just before, just behind, or just overhead. A few weeks before the time of which I write, a fine battery of eleven-inch Dahlgren guns had been placed in this space. This work was manned by details from the gunboats, and was in charge of a navy officer. We never learned why it was placed there, but it gave us good protection from the annoyances before mentioned, also covering the rear of Fort Putnam to some

extent, which, until this time, had been exposed to the fire from Sullivan's Island. We thought all this a little late, after having been obliged to submit to this inconvenience for nearly two years, but we knew how to appreciate it, having witnessed many uncomfortable experiences in that distance of four hundred yards.

The distance from this place to Fort Sumter was a little less than fourteen hundred yards, and the riflemen on the fort had, from their long experience, our range down fine, and while I do not recall that any of our own men were ever hit, there are many known instances of bullets coming very close.

On entering the battery we first see two thirty-pounder Parrott rifles on siege carriages on our right, pointing directly on Fort Sumter, and also having a range on Sullivan's Island and Mount Pleasant. These pieces were Nos. 1 and 2. Next beyond, on a platform on top of the service magazine, we see a brass howitzer, which was placed in this elevated position to fire grape and canister in case of an attack on us at night, and numbered "3."

Next beyond this, in an angle and almost upon the same level as No. 3, we have a two hundred-pounder Parrott, which was used against Sullivan's Island, Fort Sumter, and sometimes Charleston. Next, we see another of the same calibre, pointing towards Fort Sumter, Charleston and James Island. These numbers (4 and 5) were especially well protected by heavy traverses, No. 5 being used considerably in shelling the city, and consequently the recipient of much attention from the sharpshooters on Sumter, and the guns of Fort Moultrie and adjoining works.

The next piece, a ten-inch columbiad, between a good traverse and our large magazine, was a captured one, and had been turned to fire upon James Island. Beyond this large magazine was a one hundred-pounder Parrott, pointing toward James Island. Below this, in front, was No. 7, a thirty-pounder Parrott, which was firing constantly night and day, at intervals of five to fifteen minutes, at the city.

Beyond, were Nos. 8, 9 and 10, which were brass pieces for defensive purposes ; a small service magazine ; then another one hundred-pounder for city firing,

and a steel gun, which the writer cannot recollect as ever having been used. These numbers from No. 7, constituted what we called the "water battery," being located beneath the fort proper, between it and high-water-mark. This portion was properly named, as it was frequently under water at a high tide.

It will be seen by this description that our guns pointed in all directions, and that we could fire on nearly all the rebel batteries with two or more guns, though most of the firing from this battery was directed on Fort Sumter, Charleston and James Island. It will be seen, also, that our position on the end of the island could be made somewhat warm when the rebels, with their batteries forming nearly a half circle around us, chose to open from all sides, which was frequently done. Upon occasions of this kind it was almost useless to watch the enemy's fire, except from a few especially wicked guns and the mortar shells, though of course we took as good care of ourselves as possible when the man on lookout called. If he called "Bull of the woods," we did not require any further explanation to inform us that a columbiad shell or solid shot was coming for us.

After a little experience we could watch the approach of these shells and determine whether it would be necessary to cover or not. To me, when first seen, they always appeared to be coming straight for me, but a few seconds' watching has shown in several instances that I was not in their way. It is a fact, however, that these guns from the battery mentioned were exceedingly well served, and when they were fired it was wise to cover, as very many of their shells would strike the embankment directly in front of us, while others would just skip over, and if not bursting, strike in the open space between the batteries, scooping out a place in the damp sand nearly midway, and bounding, pass over the other battery and onward into the harbor. Another gun which annoyed us very much was mounted on Fort Johnson, on James Island, some distance above those just mentioned, two bolts from which have been presented to this society and may be seen at our cabinet. We all had a special dislike for this gun, and called it a wicked one. Unless the smoke of the discharge was seen it was useless to try to cover from it, for the shell came so swiftly

that it reached us some time before the report ; and if we were to have been hit, we never would have known what hurt us. The shriek or howl of these missiles will be remembered by all who have ever seen a Whitworth gun. Most of them would pass just over us and ricochet over the next battery, as the round shells before mentioned. Their range on us was so perfect that it seemed to us they could land them about where they wanted to, and at one time the appearance of two or three persons on the top of the bomb-proof was about sure to draw their fire ; and the writer has seen shells strike within a few feet of parties standing in that position, and others pass by within a foot or two of the surface.

It is not intended in this paper to write particularly of the firing, and the foregoing is simply to show that the rebel gunners could make our position uncomfortable.

Before the evacuation of Fort Wagner this battery was used for the defence of the island, and of course, upon our occupation, was reversed, rebuilt and strengthened, and Parrott guns mounted in the best position for active siege work.

The morning of the seventeenth was pleasant, and we had an idea that the day was to be an eventful one, as our battalion had for a week been under orders to be ready to move at a moment's notice, and all, excepting enough to furnish two reliefs for duty at the front, were served with three days' rations and held in constant readiness to move, the supposition being that they would go to James Island, our commanding general being anxious to get into Charleston before Sherman's troops. This was our own idea of the matter, and as no information could be obtained from those we thought might know, and part of our forces being already on James Island, we believed we were quite correct.

The day passed very much as usual until afternoon, our men being occupied in putting the battery in order, preparing ammunition and in their ordinary daily duty, and the fire from the enemy being rather light. About the middle of the afternoon we received orders to open with all the guns we could man at the moment the firing should commence from Fort Strong (formerly Wagner), and to continue it as rapidly as possible, directing our fire at Sullivan's

Island, and bursting our shells over the bridge leading from the island to Mount Pleasant. These were all the instructions we were favored with; but we were now sure that General Sherman was getting too close to Charleston for the comfort of its occupants, and that the old joke among us was to become a reality, "that Sherman would some day come down to the wharf in Charleston and beckon for us to come up."

We at once made everything ready and awaited the signal, and at about half-past seven or eight o'clock we saw the flash from the first gun from Fort Strong, and the order to fire was given. Every available piece was opened on the point it commanded, special attention being given to Sullivan's Island and the bridge. The mortar shells must have annoyed the enemy quite as much as the swift-flying rifles, though many more of the latter were fired. It would be useless for me to attempt a description of this scene. Each shell could be followed by the eye, if one had only time to watch it. The lighted fuses, tracing the course of shells, made splendid fireworks, more beautiful than any the writer had ever

before seen ; more attractive, perhaps, from the fact that they were not coming in our direction. We always observed that the direction the shells were taking had a great effect upon one's admiration for them. The writer has always rejoiced that he was a witness of this scene, and will always retain it in his memory.

There were several occasions during the siege when as great a noise was made as on this, but they need not be mentioned here, as they will furnish the ground-work of another paper in the future ; but it does seem to me that no one, unless present that night, ever heard a real, genuine noise. I have heard and read of the roar and din of battle, but the noise of the firing that still night, continuously, from those heavy guns, the hissing shriek and explosion of the shells, was deafening. We in Fort Putnam were greatly disturbed and annoyed by the shells which tripped, and those which burst prematurely from the guns in Fort Strong, which, being located below us, had to make their line of fire only a little on one side, and frequently these bad shells, and the composition bands which are on all Parrott

shells, would drop about us too closely. These accidents were common in Parrott practice, and we were fortunate to escape any serious result on this occasion ; still, this sort of thing makes a soldier mad.

About this time, the rebels opened a few guns from Sullivan's Island, and began firing at us, and for an hour or two we were between two fires—that of friend and foe. This state of affairs disturbed us very much, and our boys were almost willing to turn a gun or two on Fort Strong, just to even up with them, declaring in strong language their indifference to the fire in front, and expressing their disgust in stronger terms for that from our rear. The firing by the enemy was vigorous for about two hours, and all but the men on duty at the guns and those on guard were under cover in the bomb-proofs. No casualties occurred, our men having learned from long experience how to dodge.

About midnight we noticed a fire in the city—small at first, and rapidly increasing into a large, raging fire. In a short time this fire spread, until there were seven large fires in different sections

of the city, and one in the river near by, which we could see was a ship, as the flames crept up the rigging and masts. A burning ship is a beautiful spectacle, and we watched it as intently as possible, at the same time trying to help it along by turning our shells on it. The whole scene was fireworks on a magnificent scale, and we were in just the proper position to get the full view. Soon we heard terrific explosions in and around the city at irregular intervals, and suspected that the rebels were trying to blow up the rams and gunboats that we had been watching so long, with the ammunition stored in their magazines, and were also determined to burn the city. Excitement now ran high with us, and as much as we regretted their apparent determination to destroy everything and burn the place, we could not resist the desire to help the trouble along; so we began to put the shells in about those fires as fast as we could send them along. We fired at very short intervals, regardless of our standing instructions that the guns should be fired the long distances only a certain number of times an hour. It would seem that this was gross disregard of orders, but we

reasoned that we should have some discretionary power, and that if the chief of artillery was present he would rejoice to see the good work go on, so we kept them flying.

It was reckless, though, and we were very fortunate to escape accident, for a hot gun is a very dangerous plaything about the time the cartridge and shell are going into it. It was our custom to mount a gun and fire it until it burst, or was rendered useless from some other cause incident to artillery practice, and it may be said we were somewhat indifferent as to the life of a gun, though we always preserved them as long as possible. We mention this for the reason that the custom in the regular army had been to condemn a gun after it had been fired a certain number of times, under the theory that it was only safe for this number, estimated according to test when cast. We found to our cost, however, that Parrott guns are liable to burst at any time when fired, and that too much care in handling them is impossible. I have often rejoiced that no accident resulted from our recklessness on this, for us practically, the last night of the

war. Nothing was damaged for us, excepting that the sand was thrown around some, and we continued firing as rapidly as we dared, until daylight, when we ceased firing all around.

This night we remember as the shortest, yet the longest, in our whole experience. We were so busily occupied that we had no time on our hands, yet were so anxious to learn what the next move was to be, that it seemed as if morning would never come. We wanted to go to the city, and, after the firing ceased, speculated considerably as to the possibilities and probabilities of getting a chance to go over. We knew that our business was to remain in charge of the battery until relieved, and the thought that those left in camp might be permitted to go, and we at the front obliged to remain and content ourselves as best we could, annoyed us very much as we walked back and forth on the top of the bomb-proof, impatient and discontented. Had we the necessary permission, what could be done without a boat? and there was none in sight, the very nearest one being nearly a mile away. Where were the boat-picket all this time? Perhaps they had gone to the

city before daylight. This, I thought, would have been the proper thing if I had only secured my passage with them. These and a hundred more such thoughts occupied my time until broad daylight. It seemed as if all were asleep, no boats moving in the fleet, even ; but this matter was settled to my satisfaction a little later.

At the first dawn of day we could see on the parapet of Fort Sumter, very indistinctly, something which, as the light increased, we decided to be a field-piece used for defence against a night attack, and to fire on the boat-picket in case they should come too near. This was conclusive evidence that the garrison had gone, and we reflected that they must have had a nice time in going up the harbor with our shells from at least ten guns cracking over the fort and channel all night.

I was recently asked if I remembered that a shot was fired from our battery some time after the rest had ceased firing, and I partially denied that such a thing occurred, being unable to recall it. But, upon inquiry of some of those present, I find it to be a fact. The sergeant who fired it says that he asked

for permission to fire at that piece, saying that he could knock it off, and if he did ask for such permission it is more than probable that he received it, for this piece was in a very tempting position, just on one corner of the fort. The shot didn't hit it, much to the surprise of every one, for the sergeant had a good reputation as a "shot," and could drop a shell anywhere on that fort that he was desired to, having cut away the flag-staff several times.

Between five and six o'clock the magazine of Battery Bee, on the northern end of Sullivan's Island, exploded. The morning was pleasant and calm, and the water in the harbor without a ripple. Suddenly a huge column of smoke, dirt and timbers arose high into the air, expanding until it formed an immense, dense cloud. In a moment the report came, and it was terrific, the concussion being tremendous. At this time I was standing on the trail of No. 2, looking across the water in that direction, and plainly saw the explosion, and waited for the report. It came across the water with a rush and a sort of snapping, and a peculiar noise that I cannot describe, followed by the crash. We were conscious of feeling a

of doubt and uncertainty about this time, and glanced over the water toward the fleet, while a vision of a possible "tidal wave" suggested itself to us, causing some speculation as to its probable effect upon us in our position, scarcely above the level of the sea, and on the fleet of monitors lying abreast of us. Nothing of this kind occurred, however; the water was not disturbed, although the shock was perceptibly felt on our island, and for miles around,—the concussion and perhaps excitement being sufficient to remove me from my position on the gun-carriage. We now looked for more of this sort of work, supposing that all the magazines would be fired, and each moment expected to see Forts Sumter and Moultrie "go up." This would have been the result of the rebel programme, which was very well laid out, but fortunately was interrupted at just the right time, and in the following manner: A boat was seen moving along the creek behind Fort Strong, and to come out into the open water between Morris and James Islands, where one had not been seen in broad daylight for a long time. As this approached and passed around the head of

the island toward Sullivan's Island, we recognized Lieutenant Hackett and boat's crew, of our regiment, from the garrison of Fort Strong. We informed them that a small boat was just leaving the monitor, which lay at anchor nearly abreast of us, and cautioned them not to be beaten, though we didn't think they had the slightest chance of getting to the island first. In a moment these boats were in sight of each other, and then commenced the liveliest and most interesting boat-race ever witnessed. It seemed to us that our crew were not half at work; in fact, to be little more than moving. This may be partially accounted for from the fact that our boat was moving directly away from us, while the navy boat was pulling broadside to us; also that it appeared to us that the latter had much the shorter distance to row. It would interest many to know the exact distance each had to pull, and it may be that the state of the tide might have placed the navy boat at a great disadvantage, but we were not thinking of these matters then, the question being, who was going to get there first, and our anxiety being great because our boat was apparently making such slow progress.

But great was our joy, and excitement ran high, as the two boats drew together and narrowed the contest down fine, when we saw Hackett leap from the boat, and running up the beach, disappear over the parapet of Fort Moultrie. An instant later, down came the rebel flag and our own was run up. This was the work of a very short time, yet it interfered seriously with the rebel programme, as before mentioned, for the fuse to fire the train and blow up the magazine was nearly burned out, and in a few minutes we might have witnessed another explosion like that of Battery Bee, before described, but with far more serious results to us, had not the train been found, separated and stamped out. All this time we tried to retain our outward composure, but perhaps it need not be said that there was great excitement inside. We must be content to look on and see all these things going on, because we had no boat; and even if we had had one, we had no right to use it without instructions. If one had been near, however, it would probably have been used, whatever the consequences might have been.

The next event of importance to us was the ap-

proach of Colonel Ames, who evidently intended to go to Charleston. Of course I wanted to go with him, but there was no boat, nor did the colonel invite me. In conversation with him about going over, and several other matters, I noticed that while he didn't say I could go, he did not state any objection to it, and I concluded that if I could not go when he did I would be sure to take the next chance, and went into the battery to give the sergeant instructions, informing him that I was going to the city, and that if he could get a chance, there would not be much objection to all of them going. While I was in the battery a boat came along in which the colonel and his adjutant took passage, and when I returned they were well under way, but there was another boat coming, so I should not be far behind, and in a few minutes was on the way in company with Lieutenant Dodge and the sutler of our regiment—two very good companions. Lieutenant Dodge's wisdom in taking the sutler along I always admired, experience proving how serviceable a sutler, with cash on hand, can be to two other fellows "dead broke."

After a long pull, the distance (nearly five miles) was accomplished, and we stepped upon the wharf at Charleston, looked around a moment to take in the situation (the reverse of all we had looked upon for so long a time), and started for a walk up into the city streets. We passed the custom house, post office, Bank of South Carolina, large warehouses and other buildings of national and local importance, and presently found ourselves in a street where a fire company, with an old-fashioned hand-engine, was at work putting out one of the fires we had seen the night before. This was rather a novel sight, and we watched them some minutes while they looked us over thoroughly, too. The troops had begun to come in from James Island, and squads of them were met in every direction. All were ordered on duty to arrest stragglers, extinguish fires, confiscate any property that would be of service to any one trying to escape, such as horses, carriages, saddles, bridles, etc., and bring any captured to the post office building, which was temporary headquarters.

Many horses were brought in, thus furnishing

means for looking about town, which many availed themselves of. Very few white people were in sight, excepting the mayor and some city and confederate officials who surrendered the city and claimed protection for the hospitals, etc.; we remember of seeing but very few during the early part of the day. Some citizens opened their houses and dispensed hospitalities as best they could from their limited supplies. Corn-whiskey seemed to be the most popular drink, and it was about the only article of which a full supply could be found.

The soldiers had already begun to look through the stores, and could be seen in all directions with all sorts of plunder. A blockade-runner, which ran in the night before, had been visited, and among other things captured from her we found each soldier supplied with two or three ugly-looking dirk-knives. The first white man I met was one whom I had frequently seen in Providence before the war, and who still resides here. This circumstance seems singular. He told me he had been in the rebel army, but had got away and remained in the city. Confederate money was plenty, and some of the banks

seemed to have discounted freely I had personal knowledge of one. Many incidents occurred during our inspection of the city; many places of importance were visited, and, in connection with our impressions, may form their part of a future paper.

Our twenty-four hours' tour of duty expired some time since, but commencing on Morris Island and ending in Charleston as it did, amid such confusion and excitement, the reader hopes for pardon if he has continued a few hours over.

